

# Sex + Faith

Talking with Your Child  
from Birth to Adolescence

KATE OTT

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	ix

## **Part 1: The Big Picture**

1. Five Common Myths	2
2. The Parent’s Role	8
3. The Faith Connection	12
4. What Exactly Is <i>Sexuality</i> Education?	18
5. What’s Changed Since I Was a Kid?	25
6. Steps for Answering Children’s Questions	31

## **Part 2: Ages and Stages**

7. Birth to Kindergartners (0-5): Laying the Foundation	36
8. Elementary School Years (6-10): Gathering Information	60
9. Middle School Years (11-13): Ready for Changes	86
10. High School Years (14-18): On the Journey	116

<i>Notes</i>	145
<i>Additional Resources</i>	151
<i>List of Question Boxes</i>	157
<i>Index</i>	161

# Introduction

Talking about sex with our children is scary! How do you begin to teach your children about sex when *you* feel so uncomfortable? It is no wonder that so many children get “the talk” from their parents very late in childhood, under awkward circumstances. This plus all the other demands on our time are reasons many parents feel justified in pushing “the talk” down the road.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. Our sexuality is a gift from God. It is a natural and amazing part of who we are. Talking about our sexuality and our faith does not need to be tongue twisting or stomach churning for Christian parents. We have good news to share about our faith and our sexuality. This book is a starting point for parents who want to share their faith values as they discuss sexual development, healthy relationships, and sexual decision making with their children.

Here you will find information and new ideas. There are stories in which you might find yourself, your family, or your children’s questions reflected. What this book cannot do is take over the job of talking about faith and sexuality with your kids. No book can

do that. That is a parent's job as well as the other trusted adults in our children's lives! I know that this is not an easy task. I too stumble through sexuality conversations with my two children. I find it awkward to bring up sexuality issues in my Sunday school classes, and I talk about sexuality for a living! Talking about our faith and beliefs takes practice. Talking about sexuality is no different.

The fact is, as a parent, you are already a sexuality educator, even if you have said nothing about "sex." Your kids are learning by example from how you live in your romantic relationships or lack thereof, how you treat people based on whether they are male or female, how you treat your body and the comments you make about it, and how you show intimacy (or not) through touch such as hugs, kisses, and play with your children.

Each of these lessons also reflects your faith beliefs. Our values are shown by how we treat others and ourselves. Do you express gratitude for the gift of your body? Do you honor others' physical and emotional boundaries? In other words, how we love others and our children teaches them about sexuality and faith without a word being said.

As the first and most important sexuality educator in your child's life, you can talk about the values behind your behaviors and why they are meaningful to you. The examples of behaviors above are left only to the interpretive eyes and ears of our children if adults do not stop and take a moment to reflect on them together. Without stopping to reflect, kids may not always get the most important message or the right one from their observations. Children need and want to hear from their parents.

This book is about taking the next step. As a parent, or one who cares for and guides children in their faith, you can use this book as a map to which you can return throughout your child's life from birth to young adulthood. It has two key sections along with "question boxes" throughout.

Part 1 addresses how Christian faith shapes our understanding of sexuality and parenting. Opportunities abound in daily life to impart information and values to help children become sexu-

ally healthy, responsible, and loving adults. It is never too late to teach about sexuality and help them form relationships based on Christian values.

Part 1 also corrects some common myths related to sexuality education and information. In a true-and-false format, these statements are put to the test and often dispelled by current research. Accurate and age-appropriate information will help you feel more confident and ready to answer sexuality-related questions. Yet, no matter how prepared, you will at times be caught off guard by a question from a child. A process is suggested for answering these sorts of questions in chapter 6, “Steps for Answering Children’s Questions.”

Part 2 is organized according to age ranges. Each chapter begins with a short parenting quiz to test your sexuality IQ related to major developmental milestones for that age group. As with any categorization, these age groupings are not perfect, and each merits an entire book. Indeed, there are other resources that are age-specific and where possible, additional ones will be mentioned. Each chapter briefly describes the stages of physical, faith, and relationship development, including typical issues experienced. Each chapter also has a “Connecting Faith and Sexuality Education” section with suggested Bible stories or church practices for the age. The chapters end with a quick replay of the top educational moments and messages for parents’ quick reference.

A number of question boxes are interspersed throughout the book as sidebars or shaded pages. They lead with a question that parents might ask or something a child might say or ask. The answers are brief and to the point, and some offer reference to an organization or Web site for more information.

My hope is that you enjoy reading this book and use it as a reference throughout your child’s growth and development. All parents need companions in raising children. That does not necessarily mean being married or partnered. Companions include good resources and a host of other adults to help! This book focuses on how sexuality education, parenting, and faith intersect.

Consider sharing this book with grandparents, teachers, and trusted adults in your child's life so that they can also share sexuality-related messages, values, and faith beliefs. I recommend that you also get a separate series of age-related books on sexual health for you and your children. There are many good resources, and some are listed in the "Additional Resources" section at the end of the book.

Finally, a note about the author: me. I worked for five years as the Children and Youth Minister in a large parish prior to becoming a professor of Christian Ethics at a small seminary in the Northeast, Drew Theological School. I continue to serve as a middle school Sunday school teacher. In addition to training clergy and youth ministers, I travel the country leading youth and parenting workshops on faith values and sexuality education. I began working in churches over fifteen years ago, and I continue to learn new things each year about sexuality, faith, and parenting. This book is based on my experience and research. It is regularly tested and tweaked by the children, teens, and parents I have met when speaking at churches, not to mention in my own home where my husband and I parent our elementary- and middle school-aged children.

## Chapter 7

# Birth to Kindergarten (0–5)

## *Laying the Foundation*

### **Parenting Quiz**

The response we give our children teaches them how to respond to sexuality issues in their relationships as they grow older. How would you respond to the following statements or scenarios with a toddler, preschooler, or kindergartner? The answers suggested at the end are those that demonstrate comfort with sexuality issues, promote gender equality, build trust through relationship, and show that bodies deserve our care.

1. Mommy, my weenie hurts.
  - \_\_\_ a. I don't want to hear that word in my house. Go tell your father.
  - \_\_\_ b. Remember, we call that a penis, honey. Let's go to the bathroom, look at it, and see what might be wrong.
  - \_\_\_ c. Oh my God! Don't touch it.
  - \_\_\_ d. Can you tell me if something happened? When does it hurt?



2. Ava hugs me too much at school.
  - a. Ava loves you. Just be nice and accept the hugs.
  - b. Your body belongs to you. You decide who can hug you. Ask for a teacher's help if Ava doesn't listen to your words.
  - c. Ava is your friend. Tell her how you feel and remind her to ask before she touches you.
  - d. Answer for boy: You're too sensitive; the ladies already love you. Answer for a girl: Girls show emotions by hugging and touching, you'll get used to it.
  
3. Malcolm has nail polish on, and boys aren't allowed to wear nail polish.
  - a. Anyone can wear nail polish. It's a person's choice if they like the color and feel.
  - b. You're right. I can't believe his parents let him do that.
  - c. Malcolm is a little different from other boys. Just be nice to him.
  - d. Boys and girls can do the same things even if they have different bodies. God made us all different. Do you dress and act like all the other boys/girls in your class? (Point out differences between dresses, pants, favorite colors, toys, activities, and so forth.)
  
4. I'm going to marry my baby sister.
  - a. Only boys and girls from different families can get married.
  - b. I know you love your sister very much, but she will always be your sister. When we get older we choose to marry someone outside our family so that our family can grow.
  - c. No, you can't marry your sister. That's gross.
  - d. Being married to someone you love is important. It is a big decision that grown-ups make.

5. Is God a boy?

- a. It can be hard to picture God because God is not a person like us. So God isn't in a body that is a boy or girl. We can see God in all parts of creation. (Give an example, "When the sun shines in the morning to warm us, we can feel God like a hug.")
- b. God isn't a boy exactly, but we only say *he* because that's what the Bible says.
- c. Sometimes we talk about God as *he* or *father*. But God isn't a human boy or man. We also use other names for God like *mother*, *protector*, *spirit*, *love*, *light*, and *friend*.
- d. God is our leader and strong like boys, so that is why we call God *he* and *father*.

6. Boys have penises, and girls have vaginas.

- a. You are right. But we don't say those words out loud.
- b. Yes, a boy's penis and scrotum are on the outside of his body, and a girl's vagina is on the inside. A girl's outside genitals are called a vulva.
- c. Boys and girls have different private parts, but the rest of their bodies are the same. What other private parts are different on boys and girls? (Here you can make a distinction between inside and outside parts.)
- d. Shhhh, that's potty talk. Don't talk about girl/boy parts that you don't have, because it's impolite.

## Growing and Changing

The first question that people ask about a pregnancy or a new baby is often related to its sexuality: Is it a boy or a girl? Parents will answer based on genitals seen in an ultrasound or identified just after birth. But the boy or girl label means much more than which box the child will check on forms the rest of his or her life. The label influences how parents, siblings, extended family, teachers, and communities will interact with this child. We help shape a child's gender identity (masculine and feminine) by the name and clothes we choose, the way we talk to the baby, maybe even the way we hold and cuddle the baby. This simple distinction begins crafting a child's sexuality before she or he can even talk or walk.

From birth to age five, learning how to navigate what being identified as a boy or girl means within family, community, and culture is very important. At this age the foundation for sexuality education is cemented. If we wait to talk about health information, relationship etiquette, and family planning conversations until kids are teens, most of the information will be a history lesson. At that point, they already know most of what we waited to tell them; and the values related to the information didn't come from us. Children's sexuality is developing from the moment we name them, hold them, and love them. It is in those moments that education about relationships, bodies, and faith values start. A good foundation in faith and sexuality is integral to helping our children become sexually healthy adults.

## Physical Development

Physical development in the birth-to-five age group includes understanding the importance of touch, learning to find and then identify body parts, developing a sense of ownership of one's body, and knowing body part differences and basic reproduction.

*The Importance of Touch.* An infant's sexuality is shaped by touch, exploration, and relationship. Infants need touch, cuddling, and

bodily warmth to thrive. Many studies have shown that premature infants who are not touched or held are more likely to fail to thrive. Infants cannot be spoiled by being held. For the sake of parents' physical and emotional well-being, we don't hold babies twenty-four hours a day. Not to mention that babies need to grow in their independence, too. However, successfully supporting them as they explore and learn to use their bodies requires safe and loving hands always there to help if needed.

### **Boy or Girl or . . .**

Not every child is born with easily identifiable male and female genitalia. These children are called intersex. Intersex is an umbrella term that relates not only to male and female genitalia. The Intersex Society of North America says, "Intersex is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male." This includes any combination of chromosomes, hormone levels, and internal and external genitalia. Because there is a wide variety of intersex definitions, it can be difficult to determine the prevalence of intersex children. "The number comes out to about 1 in 1500 to 1 in 2000 births. But a lot more people than that are born with subtler forms of sex anatomy variations, some of which won't show up until later in life."

—Intersex Society of North America, "What Is Intersex?" and "How Common Is Intersex?" Frequently Asked Questions, <http://www.isna.org/faq/>.

At a few months old, babies begin to discover their fingers, elbows, toes, cheeks, and so on. They also find their genitals. An adult's reaction to the discovery can model either comfort with bodies or shame. For example, slapping the baby's hand or pushing it away to put on the diaper sends a message that it is wrong to touch genitals and they are a bad part of the body. Quick diaper

changes to avoid urination on the changing table can be a necessity. But this is not always the case, and giving infants and babies time without a diaper is good practice for all kinds of issues like diaper rash, early bladder control, and exploring their bodies. Just as a parent might coo and say, “you found your elbow.” So, too, should they say, “you found your penis or vulva.” Infants also experience erections and vaginal lubrication. In fact, there are ultrasounds of male fetuses with erections. These are natural bodily reactions and should be treated as such. As infants grow to toddlers, parents can teach that bodies respond in certain ways. It is natural and part of how God created us.

*Knowledge of Body Parts.* Toddlers are curious about all bodies—theirs, their playmates, and grown-ups. Parents can support and nurture curiosity while also teaching privacy and respect. First, naming all the body parts with accurate language helps to avoid messages about genitals as shameful and secret; it also helps to keep children safer from sexual abuse. While playing the body part game we often ask: *Where is your eye? Where is your hand? Show me your knee.* We can add: *point to your penis (or vulva).* Say the words in the exact same inquisitive tone and congratulate your child equally for identifying their foot or their penis/vulva. Accurate language for



**Child: Why do you have hair down there?**

*Parent:* When kids grow up to be adults, their bodies change. Starting when you are a teenager, you will get hair around your penis or vulva, some under your arms, and on your face too. This is one of the ways God created our body to change as we grow up. (If you have a privacy rule that was broken when your child barged in on you and asked the question, you might add: I’m glad I could answer your question. Please remember that in our house, we get privacy to shower and change. Please close the door and go back to what you were playing.)

body parts helps children feel comfortable and knowledgeable talking about their bodies. This way, they can communicate with adults if they need help getting dressed or using the bathroom, and they can also accurately report and describe abuse if it happens.

Toddlerhood can be frustrating. Toddlers desperately want to be independent and “do it themselves,” but they still need help with many things: from getting on a chair to opening a package, from using the potty to being fed. Toddlers recognize for the first time that they are their own person, adding “I” to their vocabulary. Privacy, control, and sharing become major lessons. Parents teach about these values as toddlers gain greater control of their bodies and demonstrate good decision making. For example, many children can begin picking out their own clothes and changing with assistance when they are two. Before leaving children to dressing themselves entirely, consider asking them to show you the clothes they pick out so that you can determine if the outfits are weather appropriate and clean, and if they will need help with buttons, ties, and so on. This offers parents an opportunity to explain the reasons or values for prioritizing “rules.” For example, weather



**Parent:** “Give Aunt Maria a hug good-bye”

**Child:** Hiding behind your legs, shakes head no and doesn’t speak.

Relatives can often be hurt when a child does not want to kiss or hug them. Forcing a child to kiss or hug another person sends a mixed message about consenting to unwanted touch. A parent in this situation may say, “You get to make choices about your body and who touches it. We don’t need to do a hug. But it is impolite to not say good-bye.” Reach down and comfortably hold the child so they turn to the relative and assist them in waving or shaking hands if the child will cooperate. As a parent, if you are clear about your value of owning one’s body and touching without permission only when safety or cleanliness are at issue, relatives will understand.

appropriate and clean clothes are ways to keep our bodies safe and show that we care about the gift that God gave us.

Allowing others to help us is part of forming good relationships; it doesn't mean a child is weak or a "baby." It shows that they are smart and resourceful. Remember, asking for help with clothes lasts our entire lives—think about cuff links and fancy dress zippers. Parents can start slowly with jointly picking clothes, laying them out so that they are easier to put on, and sharing tricks like sitting down to get both legs into pants. Eventually, as toddlers are able to dress themselves and make good decisions about clothing, they can be given more and more privacy. The same learning style is true about bathing and potty training. Teach some basic values, like God created us so we show our thanks by keeping ourselves clean. Provide hands-on training on the how-tos of washing. Give smaller tasks first like brushing teeth, washing hands, wiping after urinating, and then build up to bigger tasks like brushing hair, washing the whole body, and rinsing out shampoo. Skills and values shared that relate to bathing, dressing, and potty training lay the foundation for a variety of sexuality-related messages about control, privacy, and sharing as related to bodies.

*Ownership of one's body.* Around preschool, and certainly in kindergarten, children become conscious about their own body, how it appears to others, and how it functions. In many childcare and early schooling settings, bathrooms are open and gender neutral. Kids see each other's bodies with some regularity. They may also be curious about each other's bodies, touching or playing doctor. When children are within a year of each other and in the same playgroup or classroom, it is typical for their curiosity to find an imaginative play outlet. Young children engage in this play as *researchers*, not with an intent to harm or express sexual desire as our *adult glasses* might suggest. In fact, comfort with nudity teaches a strong message about body image acceptance and love of self.

Of course, a simultaneous message about privacy needs to be taught. If you find children playing doctor while naked or inspecting each other's genitals you might say:

God created our bodies and they are good. But they also belong to us. We are not allowed to touch other people's genitals without permission or unless a person needs our help (like doctors and parents help children). Our genitals, vulva, and penis are private. They are a special part of our body, and other children should not touch them.

At that point, a parent may also choose to include a message about self-touching or save that for another time. For example, you might say, "Touching our private parts can feel good. You can touch yourself when you are alone in a private room. Can you tell me a private place (bedroom, bathroom)?" These responses affirm our bodies, pleasure, and touch as positive and also place limits on age-appropriate types of touching and name acceptable places.

Playing doctor or touching and showing genitals in this young age group is common. It is common through elementary school, in fact. Responding to this natural curiosity in a calm manner is important. Even though this behavior is common, there can be times when it is not appropriate. The children involved should not be more than one or two years apart in age or abilities. They should know each other fairly well. The play should not involve force or illicit strong emotions like anger. In other words, this play should be recognizable as familiar, everyday, healthy ways our kids explore their worlds.<sup>1</sup>

*Basic Reproduction Information.* Four- and five-year-old kids' curiosity about bodies often includes questions about where babies come from. Their literal orientation to the world really means that they want to know: where is the physical location of the baby and how does it get out? Teaching accurate language for body parts for both boys and girls lays the foundation for discussing where babies come from and how they are made in a factual and natural manner. There are a few progressively informative ways to answer the question, Where do babies come from? The answer you give depends on how much your child already knows about anatomy and the context of the question.



For example, a child might look at a pregnant woman or mother and ask, How does the baby come out? Remember the steps to answering children’s questions (see pages 31-33) and clarify the question if needed. In this scenario, the specific question can be answered with something like, “The baby is growing in a place in her body called the uterus, not her stomach. The uterus is connected to her vagina, a tube that leads to an opening between her legs. When the baby is ready, it will come out of her vagina.” Presumably your child already knows these two parts of female anatomy, if not, you may want to bring up a picture or open a book such as *It’s NOT the Stork*.

There are exceptions to the typical birth and conception lesson. If the baby being discussed will be born through cesarean section, you can add, “But this baby will be born differently because the doctor needs to help the Mommy. They will make a cut through her skin and open the uterus.” Generally a cut-open abdomen and c-section is “grosser” to a child than describing vaginal birth. And in all cases, “cutting the tummy or stomach open” is incorrect anatomy.

Other children may be “made” or conceived using assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). There are age-appropriate books to help explain surrogacy, in vitro fertilization, and artificial insemination, depending on the particular circumstances of birth. ARTparenting.org is a great resource for parents developed by the



**Child: When can people have babies?**

*Parent:* Our bodies need to change to be more like a grown-up before we can have babies. These changes are called puberty and happen mostly during high school. Even if our bodies can have babies, we believe that God wants us to take special care of babies. That means most people wait to have a baby until they can make grown-up decisions and provide for a child like having a job and money to pay for things a baby needs.

Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and Media. The site shares personal stories, resources, and conversation starters. No matter the circumstances, the lesson of vaginal birth is important for children's overall knowledge of reproduction.

The basic steps of reproduction may be easier to share than a definition of intercourse. "When grown-ups love each other, they like to kiss and hug and touch each other in ways that feel good. Sometimes, a man and a woman place the man's penis into the woman's vagina. The man's penis releases sperm into the woman, which can meet her egg in the uterus, and sometimes a baby begins."

Most children will respond by saying, "Ewww, I'm so glad that's only for grown-ups"; "Gross"; or "I'll never do that." The genius of this response is its simplicity, while still naming a profound connection between love, pleasure, and reproduction. In *From Diapers to Dating*, Debra W. Haffner shares more detailed approaches to explaining intercourse to a child between 5–8 years old. Based on your values, you may want to change the relationship situation. For those who have used assisted reproductive technology, there are other resources available to explain to young children how they or their friends were made (see page 45).

—Debra W. Haffner, *From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children* (New York: New Market Press, 2000), 98.

"How did it get there?" might be a follow-up question, or the question might have started out broadly like, "How are babies made?" By the time a child is five, they can understand the following information about reproduction:

- + A sperm from a man and an ovum/egg from a woman meet in a woman's body to make a baby.
- + The sperm gets into a woman's body from a man's penis.
- + The baby grows in the uterus and comes out the vagina.

There may be many different ways and times you share this information. Parents may build on it when questions arise or get a book to share if the question is never asked. By five, kids have their own theories. Without a parent explaining the reproductive process, children may be very confused. Not to mention, they will learn this isn't a subject adults talk about. Parents can lose their credibility and comfort level in the eyes of their children as a source of sexuality information.

## Relational Development

Relational development in the birth-to-five age group includes developing trust, modeling affection and expression of feelings, and promoting gender equity.

*Developing Trust.* Questions related to reproduction inevitably overlap physical development and relational development issues. Children ask questions of their parents because they are curious but also because they trust them as a source of information. Trust is built in the everyday moments of parenting. Creating a caring environment where children feel safe and loved and have basic needs met nurtures trust. Trust is also built when parents provide learning opportunities such as waiting for a turn, following through on a promise, creating jobs for small children to contribute to the family as a whole, and applying family rules and consequences consistently and justly.

From a relational perspective, once children can identify *themselves* as an individual, they learn to respect *others* as individuals. Respect for others (the first step to love of neighbor) is taught through lessons of sharing and valuing others. For example, toddlers and preschoolers go through a process of learning about personal space. Sometimes children are interested in a mother's breasts, crawl under a skirt, or hide in between pant legs. This behavior may also carry over to friends whom they hug too exuberantly or kiss even when met with protest. Young children have a different sense of personal space, to say the least. Teaching

respect for others means controlling our bodily impulses, showing affection in a variety of ways, and sharing feelings without harming or disrespecting others (all good lessons for later in life).

Developing trust in and respect for others also means we are in multiple relationships at the same time. Young children often want to be the sole focus of parental attention and love. The parent-child relationship is challenged by other siblings' presence, developing friendships, and even by the parents' romantic relationship with each other. By naming these situations openly, children learn that parents can love many people at the same time. For example, "I love you very much. But I also love mommy and your sister/brother. I have enough love for all of you, just like God has enough love for all of us." This lesson relates to the love commandment, which calls us to have balance among God, self, and other in all our relationships.

Preschoolers often face the issue of balancing relationships rather abruptly when a new child is welcomed into the family or a friend decides to play with someone else today—"But Eli cannot be her friend, he is my friend." Parents and teachers are the guides in these situations by responding that Eli can be friends with more than one person by making time to play with people at different times.



***Child:* What does married mean?**

*Parent:* Being married is when two people decide that they love each other and want to be together for a long time. They promise to make decisions together and care for each other. Sometimes married people decide to make their family bigger by having kids or taking care of kids who need a home.

*Expressing Emotions.* How well or comfortable we are sharing our emotions is another important aspect of communication in relationships. Preschool and kindergartners tend to know

three feelings: happy, sad, and mad. There is a wide spectrum of emotion that many of us never learn to use in order to communicate more specifically how we feel. Expanding a young child's vocabulary to include frustrated, confused, excited, and lonely begins to put more specific characteristics to interactions children have. For example, if a child is starting a new school, "sad" doesn't fully describe their feelings as well as a mix of excited, confused, and lonely or nervous might. Parents who name a variety of feelings in their own experience but also who help their child reflect on experiences begin to provide broader and more specific ways for a child to communicate in relationships.

Indirectly, children learn from how grown-ups around them show and share emotion. Grown men are less likely to model sharing feelings like hugging and kissing or saying "I love you" to boy children. Boy children are often taught not to share emotions when told "boys don't cry" and "be a big boy." Unfortunately, these instances are often related to sharing emotion and communication skills. Similarly, girls are coddled and referred to as sensitive or "a real drama queen." Mothers are often faulted for being too emotional with their sons and damaging their masculinity (which is not possible). These seemingly minor social cues can set us up for a lifetime of miscommunication and assumptions about how we should establish intimacy.

*Gender Equity.* How parents communicate will partially determine whether their children take on gendered stereotypes or learn skills to express how they feel, regardless of gender. In fact, temperament and personality probably influence a child's level of emotionality more than gender or sex. Gender inequality has no place in the expression of our feelings or affection. From a young age, all children should be encouraged to name their feelings, respond according to those feelings without harming others, and be able to listen to others express their feelings. This provides a strong foundation for healthy relationships in all aspects of life.

Sex and gender inform who we are; they do not determine it. Learning to navigate what society expects of gender is different from requiring compliance with it. At an early age, some parents limit children's interests and creativity by allowing sex and gender to determine the clothes they can wear or the activities they do. Comments about what girls should do and what boys should do have lasting, often negative, effects on children's self-identity.



***Child:*** Derek says, “Boys aren’t supposed to cry; he called me a baby.”

***Parent:*** You are not a baby. Everyone cries. It is our body’s way of showing people that we are sad. Crying helps us share those feelings. God wants us to be able to share our feelings—sad, angry, happy, excited—because it makes us feel better and helps people around us understand us better.

The enforcement of gender roles is often at its peak in preschool and kindergarten years. Some sociologists suspect this is true because the world functions on assigned gender roles that children are trying to understand and assimilate. In other words, they are trying to be “like adults.” Further, telling children that gender doesn’t matter and that they can do whatever they please is a very confusing statement to a child (if not a lie).

Gender does matter. There is still great inequality in our world based on the sex and gender of people. Between three and five years old, children recognize traditional male and female gender roles and often reinforce them in their play. Young children begin to have a sense of their own sex (male, female, and intersex) and the ability to recognize other people’s sex based on gender characteristics. The ability to identify sex and gender is a developmental task. Children, however, can understand that one’s sex (male or female) does not absolutely mean a person will like specific girl or boy things. In fact, children need to learn how to negotiate cultural understandings of gender if any generation is to become successful at achieving gender equity.

Children learn that differences exist across genders quite readily. The question is do grown-ups reinforce the gender stereotypes or do they support gender equity. Here are examples of teaching opportunities for affirming gender equality—affirm when boys cry, girls wear pants, boys wear nail polish, women have different types of jobs, men drop-off/pick-up children, girls play sports, or boys engage in “homemaking” imaginary play. Diversity of gendered behavior will teach children that there is a link (albeit fuzzy) between sex and gender, but also that there is a wide range of expression and overlap among genders and sexes.

Babies, toddlers, and early school children are observant and astute. They watch us, learn from us, are confused by us, and are shaped by us. Parents who model communication skills, including sharing feelings in a gender-equitable way, help children on a path toward healthy relationships and a positive self-image.

## Faith Development

Infants to kindergartners experience faith through other people. This does not mean that they do not have their own faith or belief, but that they learn faith through relationships with others, like parents and caregivers. Learning about religion or being faithful is different from being a good person. Hopefully those things are related to one another, but new research suggests that babies might have a moral sense of right and wrong very early. Researchers Paul Bloom and Karen Wynn at Yale University discuss findings on babies’ “naive moral” sense.<sup>2</sup> Through clever and well-designed experiments using looking time (how long a child maintains visual attention) for infants and responses to need or distress from mobile babies, researchers discovered that babies have a general and rudimentary sense of compassion and empathy. These characteristics are a starting point for morality. Babies can determine, to greater and lesser extents, what matters—responding to distress and preference of individuals who help—as well as respond with like and dislike to adult moral behaviors. For example, given two puppet scenarios where one puppet shares or helps and the other hinders, babies tend to grab

the helping puppet, indicating a preference for “helpers” and an aversion to “hinderers.”

What are parents to do with this naive moral sense and how does it relate to faith development? This research suggests that infants may have the foundational capacity to tell the difference between right and wrong in common moral situations. Babies need grown-ups to work with them to build on that capacity because simple right and wrong situations become more complex as we get older, not to mention that some aspects of morality are shaped by communities and differ across cultures. As noted earlier, children are most likely to act the same way that they see adults and role models acting in their lives. Leading by example is one way to encourage decision making based on faith values. But parents should also take opportunities to talk about decision making and values with young children to make sure that they understand the connection. For example, your family might donate food or service to people in need. What decisions do you make about which organizations to work with, or how to best help, or how much time you will contribute? What faith values are the foundation for these decisions? Talking, even with young children, about these choices helps them nurture a sense of connection between faith values and life decisions.



***Child: Does God love everyone the same?***

*Parent:* God loves everyone and every part of creation. I think God loves people in a way that helps them best. People might feel that love differently because we are all unique parts of God’s creation. But that doesn’t mean God loves any person more or less than another.

Similarly, babies and toddlers learn faith concepts like trust, faith, and love through objects and relationships that have relevance to them.<sup>3</sup> For example, a blankie might be as important to a child as the cross or Communion may become to an adult.



Treating such objects with care and nurturing a sense of ritual meaning for them can translate into similar faith practices later in a child's life. This is not to say that blankies, pacifiers, or stuffed animals should stay around forever. They are, as child psychologists would call them, transitional objects. Rather, the practice of using objects to evoke a safe feeling, of ritualizing a bedtime routine, or of learning to "talk" and give life to a stuffed animal (symbol) will be similar to sacramental practices, rituals of liturgy, and prayer. Honoring young children's connection to these objects and rituals is an important step in their faith development.

For many young children, their parents are their first model of God. God as mother and father makes sense to young children. Parents show love, care for basic needs, and are seemingly ever present. They are also the ones who discipline, help, and teach. There can be a downside to the association children make between parents and God. Parents are not perfect, and in cases of abuse, neglect, or distant emotional connection, a young child's relationship with God can suffer. Worship spaces and Sunday schools can share a variety of the images of God, as mother and father; as environmental images (sun, light, water); and as feelings or actions (love, care, protection). Such language for God is a starting point for deep spiritual connection as well as positive affirmations of gender. This also means that parents can positively role model different gendered aspects of how God might be understood. Religious images and language matter when we are children, and we carry it with us as adults.

The parent as a model for God and transitional objects that teach ritual are two implicit parenting practices that contribute to faith development. There may be times as children grow older where parents start to draw connections between the two. Parents may point out that the parent is not perfect, like God is perfect. As a parent you talk to God in prayer like your child talks to their favorite stuffed animal. It is equally important to begin sharing Scripture and congregational practices so that children learn about their faith family. From two to five years old, children will take Scripture stories as true, literal events that have happened. They will continue to

do this even into elementary school. Specific stories like images of Jesus in heaven, battles, or miracle cures of tormented people can lead to negative fantasies or associating religion with scary events. There is good reason Sunday school curriculum at this age focuses on stories about creation, Noah's ark, successes of matriarchs and patriarchs in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus' childhood, and feel-good miracles, including the Easter rising. Faith stories are like family histories, most of us wait until kids are a little older to share the tragedies and we err on the side of happy endings.

What babies' moral sense is or is not has yet to be fully understood. Nonetheless, parents have an integral role to play in the moral and faith development of their children beginning at a young age. Religious messages for this age should always be: "God and Jesus love you. We show that love to yourself and other people by helping, caring, and sharing." That message is a primary Christian value. It is also a foundational sexuality education lesson. Healthy relationships reflect a love of self and other, through God's presence. The earlier children learn this, the easier it is for them to identify these qualities in their relationships and apply these values to decision making.

## **Connecting Faith and Sexuality Education**

Babies, toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergartners are learning about relationships and most often do this through their bodies—through increasing movement, touching, and playing. This is possibly the most sensuous stage of human development because of the connection to and use of our bodies to feel and discover the world. Faith practices often support this way of learning and knowing God, which nurtures young children's sexuality and positive body image.

In traditions that baptize infants, a child experiences blessing and membership through a sensory experience including being held by family in the sanctuary, passed and securely held by a clergy person, then anointed with water that has particular smells and sounds associated with it. This is not a sexual event,

but intimacy and sensuality are part of the experience, and the relationship of love within the family is broadened to include a congregational community. Not to mention, baptisms are teachable moments to talk about reproduction and choices that go into having or not having children. As a parent, you might invite a conversation about how much time, effort, and love go into raising a child and maybe even comment about how you made decisions about when or how to expand your family. This is also a time to talk about why it's important to have a community to help raise children, like the congregation. Baptisms also demonstrate what family structures a congregation publicly supports.

Young children benefit from being in worship, even if it is only from time to time or a small amount every Sunday. Some congregations have childcare during the full service for this age group. It's understandable that some parents need a break on Sunday morning and want to experience church free of cries, constant questions, or snacking distractions. However, in worship, young children can experience similar affirmations of intimacy and sensuality to the baptismal experience described above. Showing affection to children during worship—sitting close, hugging, kissing, and holding them—sends a message that parents, the faith community, and God support loving, physical forms of affection. Additionally, the simple decision to wear nice clothes to church on a regular basis instills a practice of care for our bodies and thankfulness to God. However, if the clothes are uncomfortable, stuffy, and restrictive, the care for body message may be replaced by a notion that our bodies need to be hidden and confined to be proper.

Parents often feel pressured to keep their children quiet and out of sight in worship services. Congregations who do not support children's presence in worship (even for a short time) are doing a disservice to their youngest members.<sup>4</sup> Worship can be a time to share faith practices with and educate children. Instead of lots of shh's, worship can contribute to faith development when parents and educators

- + make it about enjoying time together and celebrating community;

- + focus on leading children through greetings, prayers, singing, and lessons;
- + occasionally note why the congregation does things a certain way.

For example, if the congregation uses responsive prayer, babies and toddlers see parents take a moment to join in that prayer and recognize the whole congregation talking at the same time. From four and five, parents can point out words that the child knows in that prayer and invite children to join in as they are able. A parent might say:

We read a prayer together to involve everyone in worship. It isn't just the minister who talks. And it reminds us of what we should be thinking about when we come to church. It also means we work together as a congregation to talk at the same time.

Inclusivity, community, and putting God first through prayer in our worship are values children will learn to identify if they are pointed out. Parents might also choose to point out specific language, such as names for God that would teach about gender equity or God's presence in the environment. We might also use prayers at home over a meal or before bed that use a variety of images of God if our faith community does not.

In addition to worship, Sunday school has specific tasks related to sexuality education. Young children learn from children's book characters just as they learn from biblical stories: how to imagine new worlds, navigate a difficult situation, or act in social settings. There are age-appropriate sexuality messages in biblical stories for preschool and kindergarten ages. The story of creation teaches young children that they are special because they are created by God. This lesson should be connected to education about caring for bodies and respecting others' bodies. Sunday school teachers should be reminded to use accurate language for body parts in helping with the bathroom or reminding children about privacy issues in the classroom. Noah's ark is a perfect moment to discuss reproduction. Some children may know why Noah brought

two of every animal on the ark and others may not. The teacher can simply ask the class if they know and then state, “Yes, most animals need to have a male and female to make a baby. Noah wanted the animals to have babies after the Ark landed safely again.” *Most* is a key word in that phrase. Inevitably one child will share that worms don’t need a male and female! Using “most” also honors families who have used assisted reproductive technologies and sticks to the facts of reproduction instead of these animals creating families with a mom and dad—which is not an accurate representation of most animal mating.

Stories about Joseph (Gen. 37:1-28), Miriam (Exod. 2:1-10), and David (1 Sam. 16) reinforce that children are a special part of God’s plan and that at each stage of life we have unique gifts to share. The Gospel stories provide a platform for lessons on neighbor love (Mark 12:31; John 15:12), respect for the least among us (Matt. 5:1-12), helping each other (Luke 10:25-37), and sharing the story of Jesus and God (Matt. 25:14-30; Acts 16:16-34). These stories are examples of how to act and what values like justice, respect, love, and compassion look like in practice. In order to help children make the connection between a story and their actions, parents and religious education programs need to connect these stories to age-appropriate examples. Sharing snacks in a classroom, in our homes, or at the playground is like making loaves and fish for the 5,000 (Mark 6:30-44). Collecting coins, food, or clothes for families and children without these things is like the woman who gives her two coins (Luke 21:1-4) or when Jesus heals sick people (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 13:10-17). Being created by God means that we need to respect each other and may not touch each other without permission, and that touch needs to be loving and helpful not hurtful (punching, pushing, pinching). Learning the values of the faith tradition in caring relationships at home and in the congregation serves as the foundation for healthy sexual and moral development. In the moment when a preschooler belts out the tune “Jesus Loves Me” or “This Little Light of Mine,” it is evident that they feel it in a way that brings faith practice and sexuality together in a celebration of God’s affirmation of them as unique and loved.

# TEACHABLE MESSAGES AND MOMENTS

## **God created our bodies, and they are good.**

- + Name body parts accurately and teach about internal and external genitalia.
- + Reinforce respect and care for the body and other's bodies.
- + Encourage increased independence and responsibility for body with bathing, dressing, and potty training.
- + Assure that touching of the penis or vulva is okay and can be done in a private space.
- + Tell how reproduction happens and the location a baby grows and is birthed from.

## **Relationships are based on faith values of love, respect, equality, and shared responsibility.**

- + Discuss how families choose to have babies or not.
- + Point out family practices or rules that show values of respect, love, and sharing.
- + Do not force gendered play or identification and assess parental examples of and response to gendered behavior.
- + Remember that the parental relationship is the first model for "godly love" and "romantic love." Talk about which adults are allowed to touch their body and in what ways (parents, doctors, and teachers/childcare providers if help is needed in the bathroom). Prepare them to say no to an adult who tries to touch their genitals or make them touch theirs and tell a trusted adult if something does happen.

